

Joachim Murat:
Inn Keeper's Son to King

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“The story of Joachim Murat is so closely linked with that of Napoleon that the standard authorities for the history of the latter and his correspondence are also sources for the life-story of Murat.”¹ So wrote military historian Andrew Hilliard Atteridge nearly one hundred years after the death of Murat. Like Bonaparte, Murat made good with the opportunities that were opened up by the events of 1789 and sought his fortune in the army where his dashing and at times reckless behavior as a cavalryman launched him above the crowd of fellow soldiers. The paths of Murat and Bonaparte would cross for the first time at the Tuileries where Murat, in temporary command of a regiment of Chasseurs, raced across Paris gathering guns for Bonaparte’s use in protecting the Directory.² Atteridge goes so far as to say that “The bloodless victory in the darkness of the Place des Sablons had made Murat’s fortune.”³ From then on, Murat would be in the same corner of Bonaparte and follow the same star to unimaginable heights and ultimately to destruction. The one thing that both men had in common was their ambition for greatness; this characteristic brought them together and sometimes strained their relationship. Nonetheless, Murat knew that his ambitions were best served by serving Napoleon and he rode his coattails to a duchy and a kingdom by leading Napoleon’s cavalry so brilliantly.

Joachim Murat was born on March, 25 1767 in a small village named La Bastide near Cahors in southwestern France where his father ran an inn. Murat was not the oldest son and had no prospects of owning his father’s inn.⁴ Luckily for Murat, he had a patron in Talleyrand de Perigord, Bishop of Autun which allowed him to attend school in the hopes of joining a seminary until the regiment of Chasseurs a Cheval de Champagne rode through his town and changed his mind about becoming a priest. He joined the army as a private in 1787 the day after they marched through.⁵ When 1789 changed everything in France, Murat rose through the ranks of the army as a cavalryman, reaching the rank of colonel by the time fate would have him collide with Bonaparte.⁶ Murat said to Bonaparte after the defense of the directory “You have not an aide-de-camp of the rank of colonel, and I propose to you that I should go with you in this capacity.”⁷ Bonaparte obliged Murat and then prepared to go on his first Italian Campaign with the fiery Gascon Murat at his side entertaining great hopes of advancement and glory.

Murat’s military service at the command of Bonaparte in all accounts is one of total loyalty and bravery. It was Murat that was at the head of the Grenadiers shouting “Citizens! You are dissolved!” among the Five Hundred on 18 Brumaire⁸ and Murat that led repeated charges into enemy formations with his diamond hilted sword at his side, even rushing headlong into square formations at Bonaparte’s orders. At Eylau, Murat led such a charge through the broken

¹ A. Hilliard Atteridge. *Joachim Murat, Marshal of France and King of Naples* (London: Methuen, 1911), 170.

*bibliographical note: All citations from this work are from an Optical Character Recognition (OCR) copy of the original so that page numbers might be different from the original 1911 edition.

² Ibid., 15.

³ 16.

⁴ 6.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ According to Atteridge, “Murat’s men were the nearest available mounted force” when Bonaparte needed the guns for the defense he was charged with, therefore it was a stroke of luck for Murat to meet Bonaparte under these circumstances. 16.

⁷ 17.

⁸ Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: The Path to Power* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 501.

center of the French line and into the surging Russians, changing the course of the battle.⁹ He rose to the rank of General at 28 and was made a Marshall of France by Napoleon while leading his horsemen through Egypt, Syria, Italy, Austria, the German States, Poland, and Russia. Napoleon even rewarded Murat the title of First Horseman of Europe paying homage to the Roman imperial title of Magister Equitum.¹⁰ The young Gascon took great pride in his military accomplishments and especially his martial appearance. At the height of his command, Atteridge tells us that for the Russian campaign Murat's uniform consisted of:

í long boots of bright yellow leather, crimson riding-breeches embroidered with gold; a sky-blue tunic covered with gold lace, over which hung loosely a pelisse of scarlet velvet, with gold embroidery and fur linings. The diamond-hilted sword that he seldom drew, even at the head of a charge, hung in an embroidered cross-belt, and his long curled hair fell on his shoulders from under a three-cornered hat, heavily braided with gold, and decorated with white ostrich feathers and an aigrette fastened with a diamond buckle.¹¹

Murat was truly living far beyond anything he could have dreamed of as a boy in La Bastide and it was all thanks to following the man that was following his star. As long as Murat was by Napoleon's side, anything was possible.

Napoleon never questioned Murat's bravery on the field of battle. It was away from the battlefield that Murat and Napoleon's relationship became more complicated and would turn from the occasional annoyance to a case of outright treachery. Besides military command and title, Bonaparte also showered Murat with gifts of another kind. Despite Bonaparte's desire for his sister Caroline to marry either Gen. Jean Victor Marie Moreau or Gen. Lannes and thus secure their loyalty after 18 Brumaire, the First Consul gave his youngest sister to Murat on the advice of Josephine in marriage on January 20 1800.¹² Though it appears that Murat and Caroline genuinely loved one another, Murat would use this bond with the Bonaparte family to every advantage and he took precedence over more experienced generals like Ney, Lannes, and Massena because he was now a Bonaparte.¹³ The greatest advantage came with the establishment of the Empire and Napoleon's decision to establish hereditary lines within it. In 1806, the Grand Duchy of Berg was established and Murat and Caroline became its duke and duchess as a reward for Murat's bravery at Ulm and Austerlitz and took up residence at Dusseldorf.¹⁴ The title of duke sparked something in Murat that became a turning point in his relationship with Napoleon. From this point on, if Murat is not at the side of the Emperor, his mind becomes devoted to expanding his own territories. Almost immediately Murat saw the title of duke as a license to pursue his own ends and he set about annexing territories to the east, upsetting the peace with Prussia.¹⁵ Murat would establish a theme of acting independently and Napoleon would have to

⁹ Owen Connelly, *Blundering to Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 107.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹ Atteridge, 129.

¹² Atteridge asserts here that Moreau flat out refused Caroline's hand and that Caroline herself insisted on Murat over Lannes. In any case, Josephine always favored Murat. *Ibid.*, 36

¹³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

chastise him more than once as to his place in the Empire. In Napoleon's eyes the grand titles he bestowed did not mean that they were anything more than governors. After serving the Emperor in Spain briefly, Murat was offered the crown of Portugal or Naples and selected Naples in order to leave the troubled Iberian Peninsula behind. Joachim Murat, the King of Naples had a ring to it that must have drove Murat mad with power. It was from this throne that he would begin openly hedging men from French armies into his Neapolitan armies and openly neglecting service to the Emperor in favor of his own kingdom. Napoleon wrote to Murat about his Neapolitan endeavors saying "I must point out to you [Murat] that I am extremely hurt at the everlasting declamations with which your edicts are filled against the king, your predecessor [Joseph Bonaparte], who had all the thorns, while you are gathering the fruits, and to whom you owe eternal gratitude, I am annoyed at seeing that you so little understand what you owe to me and at your lack of courteous consideration."¹⁶ It was only with impassioned pleas from Murat that he was allowed to have a large command on the ill-fated Russian Campaign.

Upon surviving Russia and making his way back to Naples, Murat began secret negotiations with the coalition forces to guarantee his kingdom in return for a military alliance against the weak French. He continued to serve the Emperor at Dresden and Leipzig, but the deal with the allies to secure Naples as his kingdom was not far from his mind.¹⁷ This game of double dealing by Murat (which Caroline was accomplice to) would go on until Murat decided to "throw his hat in with the coalition" after the defeat at Leipzig.¹⁸ But this did not really finish his double dealings. It became clear that Murat was willing to say anything to both the Emperor and the Allies in order to keep his throne and in the end alienated everyone, even the Neapolitans. His last few months can be summed up as a wild attempt at finding refuge in either England or the United States which included stitching francs, gold, and diamonds into his clothes and making it as far as Corsica.¹⁹ Finding men loyal to him on Corsica and smaller islands off the coast of Italy, he dreamed of returning to reclaim his throne but was promptly arrested and sentenced to death. He famously refused to be blindfold and stuck his chest out at the firing squad and said "Fire at the heart, but spare the face" on October 15, 1815.²⁰

Despite Joachim Murat's fickle behavior and persistence for looking out for his own interests, the way he met death was not unlike the way he lived. Murat often wrote home to his mother and brother in heart felt terms about visiting them as soon as he was able. He loved his wife and children very much and hoped that above all else they were safe, even if that meant they were among the enemies of France. He was flamboyant and at times petty about his status at Napoleon's court, but at the same time put himself in the thick of battles where he miraculously came out unharmed. In his confession to the priest before his execution he claimed "If a man had ever fallen dead before me by my act, the picture of it would always be before me, and would pursue me to the grave."²¹ He also did all he could to avoid being any part of the

¹⁶ 119.

¹⁷ 149.

¹⁸ Murat actually urged Louis Bonaparte to join as well. Even as he accepted the deal by the Allies, Murat sent letters to Napoleon professing his loyalty. When Murat was asked to lead his Neapolitans against the French, he quit the field, thus breaking the deal. 151, 158.

¹⁹ 162.

²⁰ Apparently they did not all aim that well, one ball hit him in the cheek according to Atteridge. 168.

²¹ 169.

execution of the duc d'Enghien even though he was taken from one of Murat's territories. There is no telling as to what would have become of Murat without Napoleon. It seems that Murat was good natured but unable to deal with the heights he would soar to under Napoleon's wing. Perhaps the possibilities seemed too endless and too possible for Murat to control his ambitions, possibilities that were opened up by a man that did not have the same scruples as Murat.